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The Missing Discourse About Gender and Sexuality in the Social Studies

THE GANG RAPE OF A RETARDED GIRL by football players in Glen Ridge, New Jersey; the murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard in Wyoming; and the massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado—isolated occurrences by “deranged” or “evil” perpetrators? or symptoms of deeper social issues? Each of these tragedies has been “explained” in a variety of ways: easy access to firearms; distracted parents and broken families; the Internet and its dangers for troubled adolescents; a national decline in morality; or, as Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah suggests, the absence of school prayer. It is noteworthy, I believe, that sexist and homophobic slurs have been implicated in each of these violent incidents. What, if any, response to these problems should social studies educators consider?

It is not my intention here to try to make sense of what is, at some level, incomprehensible. But as an educator with long-standing interest in issues of gender and schooling, I see disturbing cultural patterns lying behind this national epidemic of teenage violence. What strikes me about the examples above—as well as the school shootings in Paducah, Kentucky, Jonesboro, Arkansas, and Springfield, Oregon—is the framework of gender, misogyny, homophobia, and violence that shapes these events. Misogyny is the fear and hatred of women or men perceived as effeminate; homopho-

bia is the fear and hatred of people who are believed to be lesbians and gays.

In this article, I argue that misogynistic and homophobic norms in American society have contributed to the shape of these contemporary examples of social deviance. I believe educators should address these norms, along with the violence in our society, as part of the social studies curriculum.

Several recent publications have mapped the normative terrain of male and female, straight and gay identities on which these examples of social breakdown occur. Lefkowitz's (1997) book, *Our Guys: The Glen Ridge Rape and the Secret Life of the Perfect Suburb*, describes what its back cover calls “America's jock culture and the hidden world of unrestrained adolescent sexuality.” Perlstein (1998) excavates the media coverage of the school shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and finds surprisingly little attention paid to the gendered nature of the event.

In the wake of Columbine, two books, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* (Kindlon & Thompson, 1999), and *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them* (Garbarino, 1999), brought overnight prominence for their authors. The authors of both books are psychologists who have been tracking the ways in which our culture's boys use “violence as armor” in upholding what Kindlon and Thompson call our “impossible self-image of manliness” (p. 224).

Media interest in these tragedies has been predictably intense but fleeting. By contrast, many

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teachers and administrators deal almost constantly with fears about school violence. Social studies educators should use whatever opportunity the contemporary climate of concern offers to explore the relationships between misogyny, homophobia, and violence from the standpoint of critical, transformative multicultural education (Banks, 1999).

To date, while some attention has been paid to gender within social studies (e.g., Scott, 1995; Tetrault, 1987), a discourse about the links between gender and sexuality, misogyny, homophobia, and violence in our society has largely been missing. I focus here on the theoretical connections among these factors, their manifestations in the schools, and some means of addressing these issues within the social studies curriculum.

New Conceptions of Citizenship Education

Social studies educators are in a unique position to consider gender and sexual identity because of their defining interest in citizenship education. Social studies was born as an intellectual pursuit out of the felt need for inclusion of millions of new immigrants into America's democracy. Much of American history can be read as a story of accommodation and resistance to efforts by those previously defined as "other" for inclusion under the rubric of citizenship (Foner, 1998; Kerber, 1998; Smith, 1997). Schooling has been the chief vehicle for effecting this inclusion into the body politic, with social studies in the vanguard of that project.

Over the last 20 years, new conceptualizations of citizenship education have been proposed in response to changing social needs. Parker (1996) has argued that social studies should embrace diversity as an educational imperative and reflect a non-assimilationist attitude toward the new immigrants once again entering our schools in large numbers. Makler (1999), echoing Noddings (1997) and Martin (1992), suggests that citizenship education be conceptualized more expansively than it has in the past: "How I want to be in relation to others in my personal as well as communal life is a central question in democratic living" (Makler, 1999, p. 271).

Taken together, these studies suggest that what we have traditionally called "social" in the social studies has been political and economic in nature, reflecting the binary opposition of "public"

and "private" permeating Western thought. In other words, the social studies have focused on civic competencies related to the public domains of work and politics while being less concerned with building capacity in the areas of communal and family living. In a rapidly changing society of shifting gender roles and greater openness about issues of sexuality, the future of a healthy society may depend on a social studies curriculum that considers these issues in a more forthright manner. Such a curriculum would offer alternative forms of knowledge and skills—for example, in conflict resolution—to the destructive patterns seen nationwide.

Specifically, social studies educators should address three important tasks: (a) critiquing the sometimes self-destructive gendered scripts our society provides for both young men and women; (b) challenging the unwritten curriculum of schooling that normalizes male-dominant, misogynistic, and homophobic patterns of male and female interaction; and (c) ending the anti-gay bias that results in high levels of absenteeism, dropouts, and suicide for gay youth.

Self-Destructive Gendered Scripts

The dominant view of male identity emphasizes men as tough, aggressive, independent, sexually active, rational, and intelligent. Women are seen as weak, caring, passive, frightened, stupid, and dependent, according to one study (Askew & Ross, 1988, pp. 2-3). The qualities ascribed to the two genders are not just different; they are clearly value laden. According to survey research, those qualities associated with men are overwhelmingly more valued in American society by both men and women (Askew & Ross, 1988, p. 3).

The process of socializing boys into men in this culture promotes what are considered the virtues of aggression and toughness. Parents may be afraid that if they alienate a male child from the culture of competition, sports, and hard-edged masculinity, he will be vulnerable to ridicule and shame. Many American parents want their sons to be "one of the boys," whose project during the adolescent years is to gain independence from the family through the processes of separation and individuation. Whether through divorce, desertion, or the demands of work, fathers may model such disengagement by being shadow figures in their sons' lives, physically absent or emotionally

distant. Boys need alternative images of masculinity if they are to resist the narrow gender role prescriptions that, along with other societal forces, can lead to violent behavior (Elkind, 1995; Garbarino, 1999).

Schools are places where sexual and gender identities are developed. As students begin to experience organized life in the public domain, they learn what it means to be male and female. How are images of maleness and femaleness shaped within the culture of schooling? Numerous case studies of high school life (e.g., Eckert, 1989; Eder, 1995; Kleinfeld & Yerian, 1995; Olsen, 1997) found the institutions studied to be places in which girls' popularity came more from cheerleading than strong academic or athletic performance. Conversely, athletics brought boys high status. The pervasive atmosphere of male dominance in these schools led all too frequently to intimidation of girls by boys and even to sexual harassment.

For example, Eder (1995) describes how football players, led by the coach, mocked cheerleaders. The coach "told the football players he'd get them skirts if they wanted to cheer instead of practicing harder. Then he went on to act like a cheerleader with a pompom, saying 'Go team go' in a falsetto voice" (p. 35). In Littleton, Colorado, the resentment toward popular school athletes became tragically apparent when athletes were the special targets of the shooting rampage that occurred there.

Thorne (1993) has shown that as early as elementary school, boys commonly use sexual insults and exhibit aggressive and taunting behavior to patrol the boundaries of gender identity:

The "tomboy" and "the sissy" stand at and help define the symbolic margins of dichotomous and asymmetric gender difference; the label "sissy" suggests that a boy has ventured too far into the contaminating "feminine," while "tomboys" are girls who claim some of the positive qualities associated with the "masculine." The images condense many cultural messages about gender, in part through their striking asymmetry: "tomboy" holds mixed, and often quite positive meanings, while "sissy" is an unmitigated word of contempt. (p. 111)

The commonplace nature of sexual harassment has been documented on a national scale by Stein's (1999) work and the publications of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), especially *Hostile Hallways* (1993) and *Gender Gaps*

(1999). Olsen (1997) found in her research on immigrant students in American schools that learning about American culture in school brought lessons about gender and sexual identity that were taught chiefly through a hidden curriculum of male dominance, heterosexism, and homophobia. Perlstein (1998), in his examination of the ignored, yet central, gendered dimensions of the Jonesboro, Arkansas, tragedy, cites numerous statistics indicating the pervasiveness of violence against women and girls in American society, typically by the men closest to them. Perlstein comments:

Harassment and gender violence arise from men's and women's social roles and widely-held beliefs that boys and girls bring with them to school; they flourish where people are taught that male privilege is natural and acceptable. In addition to instituting effective disciplinary policies, schools need to implement curricula which, by neither demonizing boys for sexual harassment nor asking girls to ignore it, help children understand and resist gender violence. (p. 101)

The promotion of gender role stereotypes, in either school or home, can be damaging to the development of well-integrated human beings. Rigid insistence on images of masculinity tied to the repression of emotion, inordinate reliance on competitive modes of interaction, and self-definition attained chiefly through separation and independence from others may inhibit full development of a young man's personhood. Research findings suggest that the high status afforded male athletes is actually detrimental to their overall psychological development (Manners & Smart, 1995). Likewise, images of femininity associated with passivity, dependence, and absorption with physical attractiveness may interfere with a woman's developing sense of competence, independence, and self-reliance and preclude nurturing the skills and talents she possesses. Rigid gender roles are thus dysfunctional for both young women and men.

In addition, recent psychological studies indicate that men's mental health, every bit as much as women's, rests on the satisfaction found in living relationally. While earlier psychological research treated the occupational role as central to a masculine sense of well being, and family life as peripheral, more recent research challenges the notion that as the job goes, so goes men's psychological health. Today, it is better understood that men, as well as women, seek their primary emotional, personal, and

spiritual gratification from living in healthy relationships with others (Barnett, Marshall, & Pleck, 1991).

Homophobia in the Schools

Homophobia is integral to a system of sexualized male supremacy. Cultural homophobia stems from cultural misogyny and expresses the revulsion of dominant males against degraded females and homosexual males who are identified with degraded females. As boys learn to be boys and then men, the sexist and often misogynist devaluation of female identity traits colludes with insecurity about masculine identity and sexual orientation. Such fears can produce school climates that are often aggressively sexist and homophobic. Providing a safe and respectful space in our nation's classrooms for the one in ten young people who are gay and lesbian must become part of the social studies agenda.

Violence in schools is a pervasive concern for gays and lesbians. Many authors (Askew & Ross, 1988; Connell, 1995; Garbarino 1999; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999) note the sanctioning of "controlled" violence and aggression in boys raised in the United States. During his writing of the book, *Our Guys*, Lefkowitz (1997) was shocked to discover the wall of silence erected by adults in this affluent, suburban community against efforts to investigate the gang rape of a mentally retarded girl by the town's football heroes. While the Matthew Shepard murder provoked widespread outrage, less extreme forms of violence against gays and lesbians occur daily in our society. The AAUW (1993) points out that numerous examples of sexual harassment are overlooked by teachers and administrators each year, indicating a continued tolerance of violence against women, gays, and lesbians in our schools.

While the violence against gays and lesbians is often physical, verbal abuse is pervasive. One of my own students put her finger on the root cause of this dynamic in schools. Describing her own high school years, Marcia¹ (1997) wrote:

It was not uncommon to hear the words "queer," "fag," "homo," and very rarely "lesbo" echoing in the hallways or on the grounds of the school, yet "nobody" was one. It's amazing how much time was spent referring to persons that were not present. I'm

certain the reason for this phenomenon was the fact that young male students were attempting to expel anything that detracted from our society's definition of masculinity. Male adolescents, especially at this time in their lives, are looking for ways to "achieve" manhood and this seems to require "gay bashing" in order to confirm their masculinity both to themselves and others—especially other males. "Feminine" and "masculine" qualities are at "opposite ends of the pole" and unfortunately males view their "feminine side" or qualities as weakness. In an effort to break away from dependency (weak or feminine) on their mothers, much is made of masculinity and what it means to be a "man."

In studies of self-identified gay male adolescents, researchers have found them to be at high risk for physical and psychosocial problems related to the negative attitudes of parents and peers (Besner & Spungin, 1995, p. 47). Close to four out of five gay and lesbian students report having been harassed verbally; one in five has been pelted with objects; close to two in five have been chased or stalked; and one in four has been physically assaulted, according to the publication, "Creating Safe Schools: A Resource Guide for School Staff" (Youth Pride, 1997). Over 10 years ago, the U.S. Department of Justice (1987) acknowledged that "homosexuals are probably the most frequent victims [of hate crimes] in the United States."

My own students who are mostly in their early 20s, offered personal testimony about these realities. When asked to develop an essay from the stem: "In my high school, sexual orientation was . . .," their recollections were quite consistent. Janice (1998) wrote:

The word "gay" was very frequently used. If a student was gay, it meant that he or she wasn't cool. One student might remark to another student, "that's so gay," which meant, "that's so dumb" or "that's something only a girl would do." I remember hearing such terms in the hallways, locker rooms, and athletic fields. Interestingly, derogatory remarks based on sexual orientation were generally favored by boys for other boys.

Anyone who exhibited the slightest stereotypical signs of being homosexual, such as talking with too high a voice or having too feminine or flamboyant an attitude, would be subjected to ridicule and abuse. In response, students went out of their way to prove their heterosexuality. Many had multiple intimate heterosexual relationships or engaged in "gay bashing." The administration and faculty did little to remedy the situation.

As students we encountered few gay or lesbian role models, never read any works by gay or lesbian authors, and only heard about the issue in history class with a brief mention of the suspected sexuality of historical figures such as Jane Addams. Sexual orientation was a topic that I am sure my teachers did not feel comfortable talking about and one which textbooks handled infrequently. . . . The teachers treated homosexuality like it was something that did not affect high school students and in response the students reacted with fear and bias toward anyone who did not fall within their boundaries of "normal."

It is little surprise, therefore, that many gay and lesbian teenagers suffer from chronic absenteeism at school due to abuse. One in four is forced to leave home because of conflicts with their families over sexual orientation, and eating disorders often develop as a means of denial and control by girls struggling with sexual identity issues. Moreover, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "lesbian and gay youths are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers, and they account for up to 30 percent of all completed suicides among youths" (Besner & Spungin, 1995, p. 49).

The Report of the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth (1993) found that 97 percent of students in public high schools report regularly hearing homophobic remarks from their peers. Fifty-three percent of students reported hearing homophobic comments made by school staff. As a result, lesbian and gay students "are perhaps the most underserved students in the entire educational system . . . discrimination often interfere[s] with their personal and academic development" (Uribe, 1994, p. 108).

A Curricular Shift

A variety of possibilities exist for dealing with the issues of gender, sexuality, misogyny, and homophobia within the social studies curriculum. Two points need to be emphasized, however, about the process of change. First, teachers must grapple with their own attitudes about these issues, since the evidence suggests that teachers often tolerate gay-bashing and sexist patterns in schools. Second, the work of inclusion of gender and sexual identity in the social studies curriculum can be done most effectively, in my view, through what Banks (1999) terms the "transformation" or "social action" forms

of multicultural education. These approaches focus on encouraging students to understand themes, events, concepts, and issues from different perspectives, and in the latter instance, having students decide on taking action to solve the problems they identify.

A central attitudinal and curricular shift necessary to achieve a transformative or social action approach would demand taking the perspective of both males and females, heterosexuals and homosexuals. Accommodating these perspectives in ways that are respectful of the persons with these identities is the responsibility of all educators. A social action approach might analyze the subjects of gender socialization, school violence, domestic abuse, misogyny, or homophobia as social problems for student research and response—with letter writing, survey research, volunteer activity, or lobbying of local, state, or national politicians.

Besides the Banks multicultural education template, the *Handbook of Teaching Social Issues* (Evans & Saxe, 1996) contains good ideas for dealing with the topics addressed here. For example, in their chapter, "An Issues-Centered Curriculum for High School Social Studies," Evans and Brodkey (1996) propose a one-semester course on "Gender and Sexuality in Social Life and Culture," examining the subject from both a historical and cross-cultural perspective. Among the topics the authors include in this course are "Feminist Thought," "Changing Definitions of Manhood," "Homosexuality: Gay and Lesbian Rights," and "The Changing Family" (p. 260). Just mentioning in a respectful manner the sexual identities of literary and historical figures such as Walt Whitman, James Baldwin, and Adrienne Rich can establish, albeit superficially, the contributions of gays and lesbians to our culture.

Part of the strategy here involves learning more about gay and lesbian history, women's history, and contemporary issues concerning gender (see Crocco, 1997, for resources for infusing women's history into the secondary curriculum). Numerous works of fiction featuring gay and lesbian characters are available for the young adult audience, for example: *Weetzie Bat* (Block, 1989); *The Eagle Kite* (Fox, 1995); *Annie on My Mind* (Garden, 1982); *Deliver Us From Evie* (Kerr, 1994) and *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson, 1995).

A growing body of gay and lesbian history has also emerged since Smith-Rosenberg's important

piece, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," was first published in 1975. These works laid a foundation for contemporary understandings of the socially constructed nature of categories of sexual identity and exposed the manner in which Freudian psychology "pathologized" same-sex relationships in Western societies. Anthologies such as *Hidden From History* (Vicinus, Chauncey, & Duberman, 1990) and *Gay American History* (Katz, 1992) have made this history more accessible.

On the Internet, resources concerning homophobia, gender, and sexual identity are available, from among others, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (www.glsen.org), *Rethinking Schools* (www.rethinkingschools.org), Lipkin's Harvard Gay and Lesbian School Issues Project (lipkinar@hugsel.harvard.edu), and the Safe Schools movement (www.safeschools-wa.org). The award-winning video, *It's Elementary* (Chasnoff & Cohen, 1996), explores how schools handle the issue of sexual identity in a variety of places across the country, including one approach taken by an eighth grade social studies teacher who deals with the topic in a unit on stereotyping. This documentary would be an excellent platform for a faculty inservice workshop.

Conclusion

To date, the social studies field has been largely silent in its public discourse about gender and sexuality. I am not naive about the challenges of introducing such subject matter into today's social studies classrooms. Not only do teachers risk significant resistance to their efforts at broaching these topics due to the entrenched attitudes of an essentially conservative profession and within many parent communities, but also because of the pressures in terms of curriculum coverage emanating from today's standards/high stakes testing movement.

No doubt, many teachers themselves lack depth of understanding of these issues or bring religious and personal objections to certain aspects of this subject. Furthermore, few teacher education programs in the social studies tackle gender, much less sexuality. At the secondary teacher preparation level, the focus is often on creating subject matter specialists rather than teachers concerned with caring for the whole child.

This article is a call to action for the profession. Gender and sexuality may be abstract concepts, but they are not merely "issues." Instead, they are embodied in the daily, often difficult, lives of our nation's young people. As teachers, our responsibility should be to care for the well being of all our students. This then should provide us with common ground in seeking solutions for the problems of gender, sexuality, and violence.

Addressing these topics through thoughtful, open-minded discussion as part of a broader agenda concerned with diversity and inclusion in citizenship education should be an educational imperative for the social studies in the coming years. As the vignettes introducing this article suggest, much of the health of our nation's future—for boys and girls, straight and gay—depends upon it.

Note

1. The quotation by Marcia (1997) and the subsequent quotation by Janice (1998) come from the students' journals in a class called "Diversity and the Social Studies Curriculum" at Teachers College, Columbia University. Both names are pseudonyms.

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